

Food literacy: a possible mechanism for future proofing diet quality

There have been significant changes in the food we eat and how we view food and eating. There is debate about the causes and effects of these changes; however there is no doubt that some have a relationship with the increase in diet-related disease, most notably overweight and obesity. "Food literacy" is an emerging term used to collectively describe the relative ability to basically understand the nature of food and how it is important to you and how able you are to gain information about food, process it, analyse it and act upon it. It is thought that food literacy may be important in maintaining and enhancing diet quality in a changing food environment.

Two qualitative studies were conducted to explore explored what food literacy is, what its components are and how it relates to nutrition. The first was a Delphi study of 43 Australian food experts from diverse sectors and settings. The three round Delphi began with a semi-structured telephone interview and was followed by two online surveys. Grounded theory was used to develop a conceptual model of the relationship between food literacy and nutrition. The model was then tested and refined following a phenomenological study of consumers using the example of 16-25 year olds who were responsible for feeding themselves. This second study particularly examined the relationship between disadvantage and food literacy.

It is proposed that food literacy influences nutrition through three related mechanisms of security, choice and pleasure. These mechanisms will be mediated by the local food supply and individual values. The relative importance of components of food literacy will depend upon these mediators. The level of nutrition outcome being sought (e.g. dietary guidelines vs food group serves) will also influence the relative importance of these components.

This model is useful in guiding investment, practice and evaluation. It is also useful in describing the potential role of diverse sectors in enhancing food literacy to cultivate a more empowered food consumer who is resilient and adaptive to changes in the food environment.